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ABSTRACT

Sociologists are losing touch with actual social problems and questions because sociological theory traditionally has focused on causes rather than on resolutions. Most sociological knowledge is inapplicable to specific social problems. How can sociologists attempt to become involved in matters of public policy when their discipline has not provided them with policy-oriented theory? Sociologists need to learn about policy formation, strategies of implementation, issues attendant to implementation efforts, and evaluation of outcomes. Sociology does have a role in the public policy process, but direct experience with intervention efforts is required in order to promote understanding of the process. (Author/AV)

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# Inadequacies an ... on 'Va ... res: A Comment

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I wish to make a general statement which may seem irrationally polemical to those who see no merit in it and obvious to those who agree. We are indebted to Philip Hauser for his recent contention that, "the faculty member, both as researcher and teacher, by reason of the nature and limitations of science should, in his role as faculty member, be a political eunuch." (1975: 267) In my estimation, in one morally reprehensible stroke Hauser has cut through the excessive verbiage about sociologist's various hats and has struck to the heart of the matter. Hauser has insisted that social science activity demands sociologists' political and social inactivity. Rather than a prerequisite for knowing in a rational manner, this view serves and, most assuredly has served, as an effective method of truncating what may become known-understood by sociologists. I believe, with Dahrendorf (1968: 122) and others that "sociologists have lost touch with actual social problems and questions. This is not so much because these problems go unrecognized as it is that there is a paucity of sociological knowledge which may inform action toward these problems." In part, this is because sociological theory has focused on causes rather than resolutions (Reiss, 1970: 291). In larger measure, it's because the discipline does not focus upon the actual conditions within which individuals, groups, and organizations must operate. Failure to do so has a crucial effect upon sociology's relations to the world external to it.

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As Gibbs has described it, "The idea of realizable conditions is crucial because sociologists habitually theorize about phenomena that are not controlled by legal means or otherwise . . . (T)he validity of conventional sociological theories is irrelevant. Even if those theories were absolutely valid, their policy implications would not be obvious." (1975: 2). In following role prescriptions which counterpose scientific action with withdrawal from the social world, there has emerged a radical separation from the kind of dilemmas and decisions which individuals, groups, and organizations must face and resolve daily. Following from this, the discipline has lost touch with the demands such situations place upon knowledge if it is to be applicable. The result has been that, whatever the claims of sociologists, separated as they are from the "trenches," most sociological knowledge is inapplicable in such arenas and is likely to remain so far as long as those practitioners of the discipline who do become actively and partisanly involved in 'external" social and political affairs are viewed as disciplinary deviants, role violators, enemies of the discipline. The world of "all else being equal" is one which may produce valuable knowledge but not knowledge which may be applied in a world in which all else is not equal. Until sociologists grasp the nature of the latter world, their knowledge indeed should remain cloistered within the university and its academic publications.

While I would regret it, I would have no real quarrel with a discipline chained within an intellectual monastery. There

is, however, very real reason for concern when, crippled as it is, it refuses to recognize its disability and presumes to intrude upon a world in a forceful manner--most specifically, in the case of sociology's actual and impending intrusion into matters of public policy.

## II Policy and Sociology

For my purpose, it is sufficient to say that social policy determines the priority of claims against the national product (Mackenroth, 1965: 183) and serves to guide decision making intended to maximize the probability of achieving social goals (LeBreton and Henning, 1961: 9). Policy establishes the relative importance of various social goals and directs efforts to achieve them. Fundamental to this is concern with and knowledge of "what happens when we intervene in a social system this way rather than that way" (Lane, 1972:71). A policy intrusive sociology, then, must speak to these issues. Yet this intrusion, to reiterate, apparently is to be accomplished by a discipline without policy oriented theory, without a set of propositions which deals with realizable conditions and without a body of practitioners which has much insight into what constitutes conditions which are realizable in any sensible means-ends meaning of the term.

I believe that it is not too broad a caracature to suggest that the discipline's role in social policy has reflected this state of affairs. Ostensible policy related evaluation research has a reasonably long history in sociology. While, undoubtedly, some of these evaluations have been worthwhile

sociology, many are sociology-less exercises devoid of any merit save to augment the evaluator's income. Certainly, the "policy implications" sections which are tacked onto so many research reports seem more intended to convince that the work is somehow "relevant" than to deal seriously with issues of policy. While some of the writers are simply hustlers and may be dismissed as such, others seem honestly to believe that because their research was conducted in "problem areas" (e.g. alcoholism, narcotics addiction), their conclusions must be important policy material. They have yet to learn that the latter is not an automatic consequence of the former. Certainly, it cannot be denied that sociologists have had some serious confrontations with policy issues. Perhaps the two outstanding examples are Project Camelot and the Coleman Report (including the principle author's numerous public comments attendant to it). The lingering impression of these two "social happenings" is that the former is not unrelated to an otherwordy insensitivity of sociologists while the latter points directly to whether sociologists are an asset or a liability in policy matters, if for no other reason than of political naivity. The overriding question is whether we have any idea of what we are trying to do. There seems reasonable evidence that we are ill prepared, ill trained, ill educated for the task.

In the relation of sociology to policy analysis, McCord (1972: 120) has written, "I suggest that the basic goal of policy analysis must always be kept in mind--to extend freedom, not to suppress or deceive human beings. Accepting that

position, I would answer, 'Yes, we do have the right to intervene.' But the issue still remains: what specific principles should guide our behavior" (1972:120). Whatever other principles are involved, one should be that sociologists should know something about the policy process. Anything less than a knowledge of all components of that process and their interrelationships increases the probability that we will be either ineffective or dangerous in the policy area. Sociologists, then, must come to terms with the design of policy, strategies of implementation, issues attendant to implementation efforts and evaluation of the outcomes of the previous three phases. We are most experienced in the evaluation phase probably because the demands of such activity fit most easily within the sociologist's role as traditionally conceptualized. Indeed, it has been argued by some including Moynihan (1969:193) that this is the sole legitimate policy province for social scientists. The problem with this argument is that informed evaluation necessitates awareness of the intricacies and issues involved in the other phases. If a policy effort fails, the "why" of that failure demands acquaintance with the options, the demands, the pressures which affected the actors in the other phases. Adequate information on these subjects comes only from intimate acquaintance with the dynamics of these phases. Frequently, evaluation is usely precisely because it is predicated upon assumptions that actors could have decided in ways which were completely beyond their ability to do. In this, the role of evaluator is too similar to the role of

detached critic which, too, is admissible within the conventional sociological role. As is so often the case with the critic, the evaluator's vaunted (and demanded) detachment from that being evaluated is, in fact, a separation from the very knowledge needed for informal evaluation.

Those arguing for sociological involvement in evaluation alone deny hypothetical sociological relevance to the issue of establishing priorities for the social order, that is claims against the social product. This is incredible. In principle, at least, sociological knowledge is directly relevant. An academic role conception which bars participation in this area is simply absurdly pristine. It is too delicate to be tolerated. So too do or should sociologists know something about translating policy principles into operational goals united with strategies for achievement. To deny this is to deny all we claim in the area of planned change. How could it be that the conception of our role could rule this activity beyond the pale as well. The answer is simple, I think, and involves the defense of our conventional academic role. To be informed about reasonable priority settings, to be knowledgeable abut the costs, assets and consequences of planned change, some sociologists have got to become acquainted with the intricacies of the implementation phase of the policy process. Knowledge developed here is critical for effective policy design, strategy formation and evaluation. Without such information, it is doubtful that effective policy oriented sociological theories may be developed. Creation

of knowledge which, in fact, is an effective guide to action is nearly impossible without intimate acquaintances with the realities of implementation efforts. This intimate acquaintance demands direct involvement in implementation efforts by sociologists who are thereby committed to the success of such efforts. Too often, interviews and questionnaires are insufficiently sensitive to discover what the actors themselves will not or cannot convey. And even if they can convey, inexperienced sociologists, I believe, risk failing to understand the import, the nuances of what is being told to them. Simple observations of the efforts of actors, while valuable, do not carry with them the knowing of what one observes, the kind of understanding which comes only with experience. Yet this learning through committment is abhorrent to the conventional sociological role. We are not supposed to be on one side or another. Hence, we are denied access to knowledge critical to understanding any other phase of the policy process in protection of the conventional sociologist's role. Very simply, I believe that in admonishing sociologists to stay out of the area of committment, of involved action, conventional sociology, far from protecting science, deliberately chooses to foster ignorance in favor of a "non threatening" hygienic, insensitive, intellectually arid, socially irrelevant sociology.

While sad, this is not the major problem. If we choose to practice sociology in this manner, we will probably make a hash of a fair amount of the evaluations we do but this will be the limit of our damage. The greater threat is posed

by sociologists who believe they can enter more deeply into the policy process while remaining in conformity to the traditional role, who believe they are armed with valuable knowledge when, in fact, their knowledge is irrelevant. At this point, their practice will directly affect the lives of human beings and their lack of knowledge appropriate to the task may no longer be considered simple ignorance; it will become criminal. Sociologists who insist upon the viability of the conventional academic role as a base from which to intrude upon the policy process will, at the least, do a disservice to discipline and public alike. We may only pray that this is all they will do.

I have tried to suggest that I believe the discipline has a role in the policy process but that in order to play it properly, academic role conventions must be altered. They must be altered if we are to gain access to the kind of data imperative for participation in that process, data which I believe comes only through acquaintance with the policy process in terms of intervention efforts and which only can be gained through direct experience with intervention. It is this way that we will gain an idea of what demands are placed upon knowledge if, in fact, it is to guide action. I realize that the spectre of sociologists and their students actually involved in policy implementation efforts-action <u>for</u> something, <u>for</u> somebody, may be a disquieting one. While contract research, consultantships, memberships on Advisory Boards and the like seem to fit comfortably within the sociologist's role, the

image of action intervention on the side of some party to a grievance is troublesome. Evaluation of a Welfare Department, however harsh, is acceptable. Designing and implementing a strategy whereby welfare recipients themselves actually confront the Department raises grave questions as to the future of the discipline. I have been told countless times that we are not in the business of training Saul Alinskys. Personally, I think we should be but that aside, I fail to see why the production of a graduate student who joins the evaluation section of a local probation department is acceptable but to produce a detached organizer of paroled offenders to challenge the established order somehow is not.

I believe that it will redound to the benefit of the discipline and, just possibly, the social order as well, if we come to accept the principle that the proper search for knowledge will draw the sociologist inexorably into an intense relationship with the social world, its victors and victims. Stripped of the tragic a-political condom intended to protect the sociologist from such, finally we may link up two intensely sociological questions: What is? and What should be done? We then go out to confront a world which is intensely political guided by sociological conscience.

To do so, however, the practitioner must find, somehow the courage to <u>do</u>, not the courage to succeed but to risk, to try, to fail, to be wrong, to be embarrassed or embarrassing, to cause problems for himself/herself and others--the wisdom to develop action-oriented knowledge and the courage to accept

responsibility for its application by being part of that process. Understand, what is not being proposed is the model where the "person of knowledge" feeds the "person of action." What is urged is the fusion of the two. That there may be few sociologists sufficiently adept to fulfill this role does not negate the principle. Few are there who are first rate library scholars, yet we maintain the ideal and seek to train students to approximate it. This is then no clarion call for revolution against the conventional role. I simply seek an expansion of that role so that sociologists who seek to influence the world of policy affairs, to practice their craft in that manner, may have legitimate access to data critical to the task they wish to undertake. Failing this, my ardent hope is that sociologists will stay out of public policy and will limit their practice to the confines of the university where their vices will do much less harm and their virtues will be self-praised endlessly far from the scrutiny of those who must act and be responsible for their actions.

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